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Pro-bono road show; Community Court at Carver Academy is for Bexar Residents Who Can't Pay

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For 12 years, Idolina Pecina has wanted a divorce but could never afford it.

This week, she stood before a judge, raised her right hand and took an oath. For better or for worse, she said, she's going to "finally get my divorce and get on with my life."

Pecina, 38, a machine operator at Levi Strauss & Co., has seven children and can't afford the \$2,500 needed to pay for a lawyer and court costs.

Now, thanks to a new community courthouse that opened this week at the Carver Academy, she'll get her divorce with the help of Bexar County District Court judges and \$300-an-hour-plus lawyers who are volunteering their services to bring free legal aid to poverty-stricken Bexar residents.

The judges and lawyers are offering their expertise as part of the Community Justice Program, a new facet of the San Antonio Bar Association's pro-bono work to bring free legal services to residents outside of the courthouse's confines.

The community courthouse will be held every second Tuesday of the month at Carver at 217 Paso Hondo.

"The help is here," Pecina said, adding that she got help at Carver from a lawyer who, if he had charged her, would have cost her \$800. "I couldn't afford it, but now I finally get what I've wanted all these years."

Earlier this year, the state Supreme Court called on Texas lawyers to bring more legal services to the poor.

The community courthouse, in response, will bring to people who meet federal poverty standards free legal counseling and court case filing.

It also will involve judges hearing civil court cases ranging from divorces to name changes.

The program is the first of its kind in Texas that includes state judges presiding over hearings, said David Hall, executive director of Texas Rural Legal Aid Inc., a nonprofit that matches poor people across South Texas with lawyers who will work for free.

The organization deals with about 10,000 poor clients a year who need legal help, and Hall estimates about 260,000 people in Bexar meet poverty limits and are eligible for the community courthouse services.

Twenty applicants sought help from the program on its first day, Tuesday, at the Carver. Eleven of them filed divorce petitions -the first step to getting divorced.

Already there's a short waiting list, but to apply call (210) 227-0111. To qualify, a person must make less than \$11,075 a year, or less than \$22,625 for a family of four.

"I spoke to a lawyer before coming here, but he wasn't very much help," said Gloria Aguirre, 26, crying as she sought divorce help Tuesday. "In fact, when he realized I couldn't pay him, he didn't want to talk about the case anymore.

"I've been needing a divorce for a year," she added.

Judge Karen H. Pozza and District Court Judge Phyllis Speedlin started the community courthouse, recruiting lawyers from across the county to give away their time.

The San Antonio Bar Foundation and the local bar donated more than \$5,000 to the program, and organizers are looking for more ways to fund it, Pozza said.

They plan to open another community courthouse at St. Mary's School of Law in the spring and are searching for future sites on the South Side and North Side.

Already, several of the most prestigious law firms in the city have sponsored a day, lending their lawyers to the program, Pozza said.

"We've had no trouble at all finding attorneys who are willing to help," she said.

Most of the lawyers who volunteered Tuesday were corporate attorneys, many of them inexperienced with family law. However, those lawyers underwent training sessions, a refresher course, on family law, which they studied in law school.

Lawyer Lamont Jefferson, brother of Texas Supreme Court Justice Wallace B. Jefferson, is Pecina's new attorney.

"It's refreshing that all these clients are just happy to have you as their lawyer," he said.